

Berry H, Hartley F, Nolan J, Peligra C.

[Engaging PGRs with careers support services: a collaborative approach.](#)

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**Helen Berry**, Dean of Postgraduate Studies in the Faculty of Humanities and Social Sciences (HASS), **Fiona Hartley**, Careers Adviser at the Careers Service, and **Jane Nolan** and **Cristina Peligra**, both PhD candidates, shine a light on the researcher community and a new co-created PGR careers and employability conference at Newcastle University.

# Engaging PGRs with careers support services

## A collaborative approach

**D**evising a strategy to address the issue of PhD students' needs around employability requires effective joined-up thinking at the planning stage and strong collaborative working in delivery between students, professional careers service staff and academics, in partnership with external employers and non-higher education institution partners. The Faculty of Humanities, Arts and Social Sciences (HASS) at Newcastle University has around 550 PhD students (full and part time) engaged in research projects covering 29 subject areas. The employability needs of these students are richly diverse, ranging from creative arts practitioners to professionals already employed in education, business and management. We know from a 2010 [Vitae report \(What do researchers do?\)](#) that less than 22% of PGR students will find employment in academia. So, how are we preparing all of them for the world of postdoctoral employment?

**Fundamental to the success of the event was that it was designed by students for students**

### Collaborative approach

With these questions in mind, careers service and academic staff came up with the idea of working with PhD students to co-create something new, relevant and engaging. PhD supervisors were asked for nominations of students who might be interested to contribute to the project, and an initial core team was formed. There was some resistance to getting involved, on the part of both PhD students and supervisors,



due to the additional workload for students. However, two of the original group of students who expressed an interest were able to take forward the plans and went on to recruit the volunteer student committee, which was supported by careers service and academic staff. The outcome was a one-day PGR employability conference, Researching our Futures: Where next on our career journey? Through the conference, we aimed to provide both PhD students and Early Career Researchers (ECRs) with the chance to 'explore future possibilities, discover the breadth of opportunities available and consider career choices.'

### Event feedback

**As a PhD student, one could easily feel very isolated... events like this provide an excellent opportunity to meet other people, network, expand horizons and gives a feeling that you are not alone in your PhD journey.**

### Innovation

This event was the first of its kind in our faculty. A striking measure of its success was that it was attended by 100 delegates, and hosted 26 speakers and keynote contributors. So, what made this event innovative? Fundamental to the success was that it was designed by students for students.

We pitched the event as a unique opportunity to:

- Hear from speakers who have PhDs and are now working in academia or in other professions, who would share their up-to-date experience
- Access practical advice on a wide variety of opportunities and career paths, through talks, panels, practical exercises and discussions
- Find out about sources of ongoing support
- Reflect on skills developed via a PhD and the value of those skills in a wide range of fields

Crucial to the success of the event was the partnership formed between the student committee and the academic team within the faculty, who helped to support two funding bids, identify possible speakers and offer administrative direction. The careers service was an essential source of expertise and contacts, enabling the committee to find and employ a student via the Newcastle Work Experience Programme to support the project.

### Sense of community

We were keen to ensure that the event addressed the needs and concerns of current PGRs looking at options beyond academic study. We used questionnaires and student representation to identify students' priorities and concerns. Although students responding to the questionnaire identified their interest in careers in academia, they also highlighted areas of interest such as research careers outside the academy, consultancy, teaching in schools, creative practice, working in the cultural sector and a number of other career possibilities, which informed the design and content of the conference. We secured a wide range of speakers from academia and many diverse career paths, from the charitable sector to consultancy work. Alumni now working for PwC, Arts Council England and the Higher Education Academy (HEA) – and PhD graduates who had started their own creative practices and consultancies – were able to share their first-hand experience and insights about the way the skills they had developed as researchers had equipped them for their careers.

The day itself generated a buzz of excitement and a strong sense of community. Delegates and speakers networked to share experiences and contacts. People

reported enjoying the day, finding it informative and inspirational. Many spoke about how it helped them to think about and reflect on their skills and provided ideas for developing employability skills and informing choices.

### Creating a valuable legacy

All eight students who participated in the organisation of the event gained valuable experience from taking responsibility and accountability for the conference and ultimately delivering the programme within budget. This included creating a conference brand, designing a logo, and developing a marketing campaign and social media presence. Speaker slides, talks and delegates' views were recorded so that legacy resources could be created and shared online following the conference. This will become part of HASS's Doctoral Training Programme resources.

**We are keen to build on the sense of community which was created through the conference**

Delegates have clearly indicated through their conference feedback and evaluation that the event had opened up their thinking about potential career options, with 62% of respondents reporting that their views on career possibilities had changed; the conference had enabled 'different thinking about careers.'

We are keen to build on the sense of community created through the conference. We are therefore planning future events to continue taking this shared vision forward, working together as academics, careers service professionals and PhD students, involving students in designing and delivering effective ways of considering their transferable skills, their career choices and their future employability.



Follow the conference on Twitter:

**@NURoFConference**



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